

Meteorology---My Career path

By Don Simonsen, General Forecaster

I knew what I wanted to do for a career by the age of 7. That is unusual I know, especially since for the most part, I did exactly what I had planned at such a young age. I wanted to be a meteorologist. Although TV weathermen were the big influences in my meteorology interest, I really wanted to work for the National Weather Service (back then, it was called the U.S. Weather Bureau).

I was interested in the constantly changing weather, trying to relate it to the fronts, high and low pressures, isobars, and the jet stream that were drawn on the TV weatherman's maps.

In one of my earliest memoirs in first grade, we kept a large wall calendar, where we drew in pictures to illustrate the days' weather. These were maybe my first written "observations." Gifts from parents and grandparents in the form of books and instruments provided me with a means to follow my interest. The instruments were a barometer, thermometer, and rain gage. I began to keep my own simple record of observations when I was about 9, expanding them as I grew older. It was mainly weather conditions, barometric pressure, temperature, rainfall, and snowfall. These were often a mix of my own readings and the official airport readings. I noticed that routinely there were small differences, but occasionally more significant differences between my location and the airport location, which was 3 miles away. Later we moved to a location 10 miles from the airport and the differences were more frequent, notably more rainfall and cooler morning low temperatures.

At first, I couldn't figure out how rainfall was measured, especially to the nearest hundredth of an inch. How do you stick a ruler in fast enough to get measurements, when the rain is either running off or soaking into the ground? Then I used a coffee can for a while, but my first real rain gage was the Tru-Check wedge gage, a type that is still in widespread use today. I discovered that with my own observations and data, I could sometimes make a pretty good forecast, especially in the short term period of a few hours to maybe a day. I subscribed to the daily national weather maps for a year and studied those in great detail.

I grew up Portland, OR, a much different climate than where I have lived most of my adult life; a climate where temperatures were moderate, and how much rain fell was the main interest. Heat waves, cold spells, windstorms, snow, and thunderstorms were interesting changes, but infrequent. Rarely seen but exciting events were major ice storms, heavy snows, and some snowstorms that brought blizzard or near blizzard conditions, and destructive windstorms. The destructive Columbus Day wind storm of 1962 was one of my great weather

memories, as was the unusually snowy winter of 1968-69. Watching TV meteorologists in Portland, in particular Bob Lynott, and Jack Capell helped keep my interest in weather going through high school.

I struggled through high school, but I went to several colleges and eventually completed most of the math, physics, meteorology, and other courses I needed, graduating from Oregon State University.

Employment with the National Weather Service did not come soon. In fact, I went into another line of work for several years, but did continue to apply for job openings in the National Weather Service. My first job in federal government was with the Post Office in Portland, and then later I worked as a Lab Technician at Ft Detrick MD. My first National Weather Service job was in Williston ND. I've also worked at the Pendleton, OR, Havre, and Helena MT offices, in addition to Glasgow MT, where I have worked since April 1995.